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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses critical thinking and ways education leaders can apply it to problems in educational settings. It forwards a model of critical thinking, called TC2, designed by The Critical Thinking Consortium, a group of scholars, teachers, and educational leaders in British Columbia, Canada. The model addresses four interrelated components that influence the making up of one's mind: (1) the critical community: a supportive environment for thinking; (2) the tools for thought: intellectual resources, including background knowledge, criteria for judgment, critical-thinking vocabulary, thinking skills, and habits of mind; (3) the critical challenge: the thinking task; and (4) assessing the tools: adjudicating the quality of thinking. The paper examines the dilemmas of leadership and presents ways to apply the TC2 model through a case study of the opening of a new school and the leadership of its vice principal. (WFA)

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Critically Thoughtful Leadership.

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Critically Thoughtful Leadership

A Presentation to

The Commonwealth Council of Educational Administration and Management: Rethinking the Status Quo

Thursday April 24, 2003

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Educational dilemmas

Larry Cuban (1992) calls them "dilemmas" -- those ambiguous, high stakes challenges that confront educational leaders. According to Cuban, dilemmas have no once-and-for-all solutions; they are "conflict-ridden situations that require choices because competing, highly prized values cannot be fully satisfied." While entrepreneurialism and internationalization are among the current dilemmas facing educational leaders, messy and obstinate problems such as these are neither of the modern world, nor specific to the teaching profession, or to leaders in educational settings. A sampling shows that writers on organizations concur with Cuban's notion of the messiness of life and leadership.

Peter Vaill (1989) coined the phrase, "permanent white water" to describe the complex environment of work; Robert Evans (1996) writes about "core tensions"; Fullan (2001) describes a "complexity [that] keeps people on the edge of chaos", and Heifetz (1994) suggests that we need leaders who can "face problems for which there are no simple, painless solutions." In 1927, physicist Werner Heisenberg articulated the uncertainty principle, claiming that one could not measure both the exact position and the exact momentum of a particle at the same time. This chaos theory is not limited to science. A form of chaos theory envelops all of us – teachers, leaders, citizens – requiring that we abandon our commitment to linear rationality without abrogating our responsibility to live wisely in our common world.

While these authors share a realization that the complexity of our society and its organizations (including schools), presents challenges that appear to defy the measured, logical response of educational leaders, none suggests that we accept the status quo, or act in some thought-less fashion. Instead they encourage the development of a holistic orientation enabling leaders to study the

component parts of sophisticated social systems, build both technical competence and deep curiosity, and act with head *and* heart, all the while "avoid[ing] a fantasy of omnipotence." (Vaill, 1989, p. 84)

We've learned important lessons from scholars who have examined the "problem" of change/reform/status quo in organizations, among them:

- Leadership is/can be shared
- Context/culture matters
- High standards of performance are necessary and can be learned, practiced, developed
- Intellectual rationality is insufficient
- We are *of* the dilemma, not *outside* it.
- Nothing – a problem, a context, a solution – stands still while we are trying to engage with/about it...

Evans summarizes, calling for "Strategic-systemic approaches [that] see leadership not as a science but as a craft, a unique blend of practical experience, personal skill, judgment, and intuition, all informed by training and research. Managing, like teaching, is simply too messy, complex and unpredictable to be treated as a logical, linear activity." (Evans, 1996, p. 167)

The development of this strategic-systemic approach to leadership, like teaching, is a one-thing-at-a-time and everything-at-once experience. While recognizing the interdependence of the variables, the leader may need to focus on individual dimensions at particular times, especially when trying to build personal competence. She/he may find it necessary to value one aspect of the context over others when addressing a specific dilemma; he/she may have resources available to implement a decision that is less than ideal, calling on the leader to surrender perfection without surrendering commitment.

This difficult work contributes to what Evans (1996) identifies as one of the core tensions of change, namely the isolation of the leader in spite of her/his location in a fishbowl. In the vernacular,

"it's lonely at the top!" What support is there for leaders to learn and flourish, to build confidence and repertoire, to develop a practice that is idiosyncratic but thoughtful, demanding and forgiving?

A Window on Developing Leadership: The Case of a New School

A new school opening its doors and welcoming staff and students into a newly forming community is not a rare occurrence, but neither does it happen with sufficient frequency to be accepted as commonplace. The opening of a new school therefore attracts attention and scrutiny, raises expectations, provides opportunity for speculation and invites assumptions. We have chosen to situate our examination of the dilemmas of leadership through a case study -- the opening of a new school.

Community Secondary School has been under construction for six months. With many of the construction issues settled and the building nearing completion, the process of staffing, decisions about school boundaries, grade configuration and interior fittings of the school have reached the top of the agenda. The Board of Education has appointed a new Principal to guide these final decisions and she in turn has made her selection of a Vice-Principal to complete the leadership team.

The community has watched with interest as the new building takes shape. Everyone is comparing the windows, the carpeting, the media rooms and the school landscaping with those of other, older facilities in the district. Adults and children trade opinions about learning and working in brand new, well-equipped spaces as compared to older, more traditional – and possibly more dilapidated facilities. The parents tell stories about the personality, community and tradition that came along with their older schools, a personality that contributed to their learning experiences. They question how easily, or how soon, a new school can become comfortable. Teachers, too, are eyeing the building and thinking about how it might support or impede their pedagogical styles or the requirements of their subject area specializations. They joke about how soon it will be overcrowded!

In this district, elementary schools typically serve students in grades Kindergarten to 7 and secondary schools serve students in grades 8 to 12. School catchment boundaries are firm, with all students from elementary schools attending the secondary school in their neighbourhood. The district has decided that Community Secondary School will change two aspects of this pattern. It will welcome grade 7 students along with the typical grade 8 students from the surrounding neighbourhood, and it will allow students to cross historic catchment boundaries to attend Community Secondary School.

District leaders have also decided to implement a "school within a school" model for student grouping, a structure that has been used successfully in other secondary schools in the district. For a number of years these large schools have offered mini- school options for small groups of students, primarily in grades 8-10, creating settings in which a greater emphasis can be placed on community building as cohorts of students work more intimately with each other and with their teachers. Each mini-school has a particular focus, such as outdoor education or music and drama.

This decision to step away from established practice for school configuration gives rise to the first dilemma. The expectations of elementary school students about which school they will attend have been altered. In addition, the point at which they will make the transition to secondary school is no longer fixed at grade 8. If they choose to attend Community Secondary, they may enter at grade 7. Many questions have arisen for both students and their families, questions that will undoubtedly be directed at the new leadership team of Community Secondary School.

The decision to configure the school as a collection of mini-schools, each with a particular focus has presented a second dilemma to students, parents and the leadership team. The usual experience offered by secondary schools is often accepted as standard fare, unexamined by students and families. When the element of choice is introduced, it has potential for a different level of

engagement which, in turn, has implications for students, parents and staff. Choice often introduces dilemmas.

With the establishment of the opening configuration for the school, one where grade 8 is no longer the earliest entry to secondary school, the next issue facing the leadership team is that of staffing. Will staff be drawn from those with secondary experience, elementary experience, and/or experience in both settings? Is there an expectation that this school will have the culture of a secondary school or an elementary school? Is this an opportunity to create a new "hybrid" culture? If a new culture is a goal, does its achievement depend on initial staff selection? What areas of expertise will be required by the mini-school design? What attributes are valued by the leadership team? How will all of these considerations be distilled into written job descriptions necessary for the posting process under the collective agreement with the teachers' union? And, as all of the information about the school building, the student configuration and the job postings finds its way into the teaching community, what expectations will form among prospective candidates for staff positions at Community Secondary School?

The issues of physical plant, staffing, student and community expectations outlined above form the basis of our case, offering the new administrative team a rich array of dilemmas to consider. How the leaders anticipate and react to the emerging dilemmas will set the style of their leadership.

Leaders aren't soloists

Bailin, Case, Coombs and Daniels (1999) claim that Rodin's image of the solitary thinker is misleading. Building and sustaining a community in which critical thinking is modeled, encouraged and developed is one of the four pillars of the *Critical Thinking Consortium's* model for critical thinking. Likewise, leadership is not a solo act, exclusive to the job description of the school district

superintendent or CEO. Leaders must think, act, and support the thinking and acting of others. In education, leaders are everywhere. Cuban argues, "making moral decisions is at the heart of educational practice. All teachers, administrators, policymakers, and researchers, at one time or another, must act. To act, they must choose." (Cuban, 1992, p. XX) Studying the TC^2 conception and applying it to their choosing and acting will help critically thoughtful leaders to confront educational dilemmas in 2003 and beyond.

The issues faced by the leadership team in our case study school offer multiple dilemmas for them and the community of their school. It is in their acting that we can see how they have chosen. We can assess whether they have made critically thoughtful choices based on criteria, using thinking tools, building on relevant background knowledge, engaging with others in their community of thinkers. The balance of this paper develops a narrative of one possible scenario that could rise from the actions of an emerging critically thoughtful leadership team confronting the dilemmas of opening a new school. In particular, the lens focuses on the new Vice Principal as she interacts with staff and her leadership team mate as a critical thinker.

Acting as a critically thoughtful leader

There was a definite buzz as Sophie approached the banquet room at the Hillside Inn. She had started out for the first meeting of the new Community Secondary School staff earlier than usual, but the vice-principal title on her new business cards did not impress her three-year-old son one bit. Now she was running late due to a lost bunny!

Sophie entered the room where a number of people had already begun to find seats at the tables. Familiar faces were few, but the excitement of the new adventure was more powerful than her feeling of anxiety. Sophie spied the principal and the facilitator of the session across the room. She moved

quickly to introduce herself to the facilitator, a soon-to-retire district administrator. Sophie engaged in the usual pleasantries and found a seat near the side of the room with two teachers she had taught with in her first teaching assignment.

The facilitator called the group to order and began with an icebreaker to allow all the new staff to begin to acquaint themselves with one another. There was some nervous laughter as they compared themselves to an animal! Sophie had always found these activities to be a bit artificial but it was a new school and a new staff and she wasn't about to set herself apart so she joined in with some enthusiasm.

The primary purpose of the morning session was to begin to draft a mission statement for the new school. There were some initial groans from the staff but with some gentle cajoling from the facilitator, most of the groups appeared onside, for the moment. The groups' task was to brainstorm the strengths and challenges of a new school. The facilitator suggested a t-chart to help organize their thoughts. Each group was given a large piece of chart paper and felt pens. Sophie recognized the strategy as one she had used many times with her students and she was surprised when one of the "veteran" teachers indicated that she, too, had tried the strategy but it just did not work in her class. Sophie thought to herself that this was a comment she had hoped not to hear in her new school...well at least not for the first week. She didn't engage the teacher about their potential disagreement, but focused her energy back on the task of the group.

The groups set about brainstorming the strengths and challenges. The mood seemed light as the noise level reached new heights. The levity in the room bodes well, Sophie thought. This staff seems to be high energy and lots of fun. The facilitator called 'time' after having given the groups about half an hour. Time had passed quickly, so quickly that coffee time was rapidly approaching. The groups were asked to post their charts on the wall to allow for a walk around by all participants. As Sophie and her group moved to the first chart, one of her group, Terry, laughed nervously as they read aloud the

comments. She commented quietly that this chart seemed to be all about challenges, with few strengths. Two other members commented similarly. Sophie took a look at the group members who had worked on this chart. She had been in several implementation sessions with one of the group members and had remembered how negative that individual had been about a recent curriculum change. She speculated to herself that the group might have been unduly influenced. As the group moved on to the second chart, they again commented that the group had also noted far more challenges than strengths. That did surprise Sophie, as she had interviewed three of the four group members and was struck as to how positive they were about coming into a new situation.

Sophie's group moved towards the coffee and muffins but she was curious about the other charts. She moved from chart to chart and was struck by the numerous challenges noted by the new staff. As Sophie sipped her coffee, she focused on the conversations around her. These, too, were tinged with the sounds of people becoming overwhelmed. Comments indicated a growing realization of the enormity of the task of a new school, new staff, new students and new parents. Sophie tried to lighten the mood by telling her "late" morning-start story but it appeared the opening, friendly, playful tone of the staff had started to shift as they moved into their planning and thinking tasks. Now they were far more serious and apprehensive.

The facilitator had also been moving around the charts reading them intently. He called both Sophie and the principal over to the side of the room and reported that he was concerned about what he perceived as a fair amount of negativity in the tone of the challenges. The principal was initially dismissive but as the conversation progressed she too, was concerned about the next steps. Sophie had said very little to this point. As an "untested" administrator in a new setting, she had a sense that listening was the best strategy. As she moved away from the conversation, she called upon her own background knowledge from other experiences, searching her repertoire for ideas and strategies that

might be useful in this new and difficult context. As she did so, she was struck by how much this situation reminded her of her own class.

For several months she had been focusing on critical thinking and one of the thinking strategies she was teaching and modeling was critical thinking vocabulary. In particular, she was working with students to help them distinguish between a fact and an inference. Sophie had recognized that her students' reliance on textbook references was creating a situation where they believed that texts were filled with facts and therefore it was neither necessary nor appropriate to examine the references. She asked students to review a passage in one chapter of the text identifying elements that could be defined as facts, and others that would have to be called inferences. Sophie provided multiple examples before launching into the exercise and gave students a T-chart to facilitate their collection and separation of facts and inferences. To the students' surprise, much of what they had labeled as "fact" turned out to be inference by the author of the text. Over the course of the term she was pleased to notice that the students were examining text references with a more critical perspective, and challenging one another to defend a claim of "fact" when it was made.

Would a similar strategy work with her colleagues? Would it help the group to get out of their collective sense of anxiety about the difficulties of opening their new school? Sophie met with the facilitator and described her idea. He felt that it was worth a try. He grabbed a package of colored dots and invited the groups to engage in a "fact" and "inference" exercise. He began by sharing his observation that in spite of the early optimism, there was a decidedly pessimistic overtone to the brainstorming of strengths and challenges. There were a number of nodding heads as he spoke. The principal then took the floor. She noted that before they moved on the staff should deal with identified strengths and challenges but felt she needed more clarification.

Sophie was given the nod by the facilitator and she stood slowly. She was rather small in stature but she was often told she talked taller! She rose up and to break some of tension she noted that she was indeed standing, so if they couldn't tell where the voice was coming from she would hold up her pen. This broke some of the tension and there was some audible laughter! Sophie then began to describe the strategy that she had suggested to the facilitator. She was careful not to tell them they had missed the point of the exercise but stressed the value in revisiting initial impressions.

Having given some examples, Sophie gave out the dots and asked the groups to return to their charts. They should look at each strength and challenge, determine whether each statement was a fact or an inference and mark each with the appropriate dot. The groups quickly moved to their charts, some of the groups already debating whether a listed issue was a fact or an inference. Sophie stood back from her group this time and with the facilitator began to move about the room. The conversations were changing in tone and focus. She started to hear phrases like "tell me more", "I don't understand what you mean", "that's what I had heard", "on second thought, that could be a strength or a challenge", and her favorite, "it's always been that way". The tone of the conversation was once again lively, there were many questions and paraphrases, and there were many "second thoughts." Sophie commented to the facilitator and the principal that this was not unlike what had happened in her class. There were now fewer "facts" and many more "inferences". What had previously been taken to be fact was in fact, not!

When the facilitator asked the groups to come together to share their reactions, it was difficult to gain their attention, as their conversations were clearly not finished. In a quick "whip around" of the groups the facilitator was struck by the number of times staff members noted that once they began the exercise, their perceptions changed. Much of what they had accepted as fact were perceptions and/or inferences. Maybe a new school building would be great, and maybe it wouldn't. Maybe some parents

of grade 7 students would feel their child was too young to attend secondary school, and they, the staff, had better think about how to address that anxiety, and not merely label those parents as negative. While it was a fact that they would initially have a small student body, they needed to examine how to take best advantage of that opportunity, pedagogically and socially. OK, Community Secondary School was going to provide lots of challenges, but they were much clearer and possible solutions might be found more easily, especially with the support of this group of teacher/leader/thinkers.

Sophie smiled to herself. It was gratifying to her to realize that teaching and critical thinking strategies were useful in all aspects of her life. She sat back and continued to think about the strengths and challenges of opening a new school.

Living in the 'and' between bureaucracy and community

Beairsto (1999) suggests a view of educational leadership that illuminates and compliments Cuban's dilemmas. He argues that the school, hence school-based leadership, is pulled between two world views. One view is defined by a bureaucratic stance, represented by such words as goals, rules, roles, efficiency, and compliance. The other view takes a community stance, represented by broad purposes, rituals, and a focus on people and relationships. He acknowledges that "...schools are at one and the same time mechanical, hierarchical bureaucracies and organic moral communities" and that, "Not only educational administrators, but the entire school community must attend simultaneously to these contradictory aspects of school life." (Beairsto, 1991, p. 133)

The entire school community requires substantial capacity and skills to navigate this permanent white water. Although the challenge seems impossible, many leaders have cultivated personal attributes and ways of thinking, responding and interacting that allow them to function and flourish,

supporting their staff in the "and" between bureaucracy and community, and enjoying their participation with students in organic moral communities. We outline one approach below.

A critical thinking approach to living in the 'and'.

A feature that surfaces time after time in our case study and in the real world of each school is the number and significance of the choices that must be made. How to make a decision between plausible alternatives is a dilemma in itself, as we realize that no template or oracle can offer *the* solution. However, in their theoretical and pedagogical work on critical thinking, Bailin, Case, Coombs and Daniels (1999) have developed a conception of critical thinking that can be applied as productively to leadership dilemmas as to the critically thoughtful choices children are learning to make in a primary classroom. This model is central to the work of The Critical Thinking Consortium, TC^2, a group scholars, teachers and educational leaders in British Columbia who work together to infuse critical thinking into the day-to-day lives of people in schools:

> Critical thinking involves thinking through problematic situations about what to believe or how to act where the thinker makes reasoned judgments that embody the qualities of a competent thinker. (Case and Daniels, 1996: xiii)

The conception addresses four interrelated components influencing the making up of one's mind:

1. the critical community - a supportive environment for thinking
2. the tools for thought - intellectual resources including background knowledge, criteria for judgment, critical thinking vocabulary, thinking skills and habits of mind
3. the critical challenge - the thinking task
4. assessing for the tools - adjudicating the quality of thinking

We will elaborate on these elements in turn.

1. The Critical Community

Central to the conception of critical thinking is attention to the environment in which thoughtful decisions can be made. Certain attributes must be present in a community, be it family, classroom, or school, for critically thoughtful responses to be common. A high level of trust that provides for risk-taking is a central attribute. Because dilemmas are not solution oriented, that is there is not a 'right' answer, individuals engaged in working through the dilemma must be able to put forward their ideas without fear of ridicule or embarrassment. Constructing a high trust environment that supports this type of personal risk taking requires awareness and diligence from situational as well as positional leaders and from all participants or members of the community. In our scenario, Sophie exhibits awareness of the attributes of a critical community and takes action to support the new staffs' emerging community. She listens first, seeks clarification, and reflects on her past experiences. Mindful of the need to nurture the community as they engage with dilemmas she seeks and employs a strategy that promotes reflection and provides for respectful debate of divergent views.

Not only does this environment require careful construction, it requires ongoing maintenance. Each person in the community accepts the need for and agrees to acquire predispositions of open-mindedness to accept new and different ideas, fair-mindedness to give due consideration to others' ideas, practicing wait-time for questions and ideas to develop, listening first to understand before seeking to be understood (Covey, 1989) to name a few. With Sophie's initial leadership, the staff now has some experience in working as a critically thoughtful community.

2. The Tools for Thought

When faced with the need to make a decision, the thinker is unlikely to be able to proceed in a competent manner without access to "tools" for the thinking task. It should be noted that while the tools are general enough to be named, they are in practice specific to the task at hand. For instance, the relevant background knowledge is tightly tied to the specific question/dilemma. Designers of the TC^2 conception have organized these attributes into five categories that they term the 'intellectual tools". In no particular order they are:

1. *Background knowledge*: the task-relevant information necessary to think through the dilemma and make a judgment
2. *Criteria for judgment*: as a dilemma requires a thinker to choose between alternative ideas or actions, the critical thinker is assisted in the choice by measuring her/his judgment against appropriate standards or criteria
3. *Thinking strategies*: various processes that a thinker may apply to the work of resolving a dilemma.
4. *Habits of mind*: the predispositions or attitudes necessary to stay with a task, to consider various perspectives, to hear others, to adopt an inquiring stance.
5. *Critical thinking concepts or vocabulary*: possession of the concepts that allow the thinker to make distinctions that are key in thinking through a dilemma such as premise and conclusion, bias, point of view.

Sophie's previous experience in working in a critically thoughtful way with her students allowed her to recognize the need to develop a critical thinking concept to move her staff forward with their dilemmas. Her experiences with her students had shown her that competent thinkers could recognize the difference between a fact and an inference when the distinction was made clear. Further, they could use that distinction to re-examine initial responses to an issue in a way that allowed them to

recognize that some challenges were inferred rather than actual and that challenges and strengths could be two sides of the same coin!

3. Critical Challenges

"Critical challenge" is the term coined by the conceptualizers of the model to describe a task that provides a chance for students to exercise their thinking muscles. It requires one to access and use the intellectual tools to think through a dilemma. In classrooms, teachers seek to design tasks that meet these 4 criteria:

- require judgment between plausible alternatives,
- are focused to limit the scope of the intellectual tools required to work through the dilemma,
- are relevant to the students, and
- are central to the curriculum.

In our case study we have pulled out a few of the dilemmas inherent in the task of opening a new school. As is the case in schools (and in most of life), there is no need to look for dilemmas or tasks that require thinking, they are ever present. Teachers and students need to concentrate their efforts of building their capacities as competent thinkers!

4. Assessing for the competent use of the tools.

An issue in the development of critical thinking long unaddressed has been that of how to assess thinking. As long as educators are in the business of evaluating and reporting on the progress of their students, there is a need to have valid, reliable and authentic ways of assessing what we teach and learn. This key component has been relatively unexplored in the development of conceptions of critical thinking and it was through the recognition of the intellectual tools necessary for critical thoughtfulness that the key to assessment of critical thinking emerged. One way to understand this concept is to contrast *un*critical thinking with critical thinking. What distinguishes critical thinking from uncritical

thinking is the *quality of thinking*, and this can be seen only by assessing the response to a critical challenge (dilemma). Awareness of the necessary tools for thinking allows us to observe their use in action. We can then learn how to judge the quality of the thinker through the degree of competency with which they use the tools.

In the scenario we see evidence of Sophie's competent use of the intellectual tools. Her background knowledge of the model for critical thinking allowed her to recognize the situation developing in the staff meeting as a dilemma, a problematic situation. She stood back from her engagement in the exercise to consider what was developing and how next to proceed, a useful thinking strategy. Sophie employed the habit of mind, open-mindedness, to both listen to her colleagues and consider the information they had collected on their charts in a non-judgmental manner. She recognized the lack of the critical thinking concept of distinguishing fact from inference in staffs' response to their task. As a competent thinker herself, she was then able to teach the concept and move the staffs' thinking forward.

Sophie's scenario indicates that an emerging leader, negotiating the permanent white water of educational leadership, can be supported through an understanding and use of a clearly articulated model for critical thinking. Leaders must think, act and support the thinking and acting of others. In doing so they are assisted when they have a deep understanding of what it is to approach dilemmas from a critically thoughtful perspective.

Many teachers in British Columbia are using this conception across the curriculum to help students develop their thinking skills. Classrooms are becoming supportive communities of inquiry and debate, with students practicing "communicative virtues" (Burbules & Rice, 1991) such as tolerance, patience, respect for difference and the self-imposition of restraint, as they explore their own dilemmas. The authors of this paper have worked for several years in pre-service and in-service

teacher education, using the TC^2 critical thinking conception with teachers and are confident that it has an equally valuable contribution to make to the examination of the dilemmas of leadership.

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